

The Fox Theatre Institute

Case Study #1: Southside Theatre Guild

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SETTING THE STAGE FOR MAGIC

For a community theatre with a long history of successful shows, it's one thing to envision a new stage production like "The Rainmaker" or "Fiddler on the Roof" – but another matter entirely when there's the prospect of rain actually seeping through the roof and onto the stage on a stormy night.

That's the sort of existential crisis faced by Fairburn's Southside Theatre Guild (STG) in 2019: after nearly 50 years in operation, the theatre's all-volunteer leadership team was uncertain the nonprofit theatre could even continue without immediate repairs to the roof.

"When there was a storm, theatre volunteers would all get in our cars to come capture rain in buckets," says STG fundraising lead, Janet Reed, a volunteer and actress with the organization since 1975. "You'd see rain seeping through the ceiling, right onto the front of the stage. We'd have to move props and costumes – and just pray it wouldn't rain on a performance night."

The problem was urgent, but funding was tight. The independent theatre's financial structure has generally been focused on simply funding the next play or musical – about four shows a year, totaling more than 200 and comprising roughly 1,800 performances since inception in 1973 – not costly facility repairs.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES WITH SUPPORT

Enter the Fox Theatre Institute (FTI), stage left. Reed attended an FTI-sponsored grant-writing seminar, then applied for an FTI Urgent/Emergency Grant. “I’m a scriptwriter but had never submitted a grant before – I had no clue how to write one,” she laughs. “The FTI staff held my hand and walked me through it.”

A shared vision of success is one of the FTI’s refreshingly supportive aspects, Janet learned. As a fellow theatre that’s faced existential threats of its own, the Fox Theatre Institute’s vision is to help other theatres succeed.

The FTI approved the emergency roof grant for \$75,000. With roof repairs completed in early 2020, the STG leadership team eagerly moved forward with scheduling stage productions for the season ahead.

However, new challenges presented themselves – the pandemic appeared, forcing the theatre and many other organizations into lockdown. The road forward was unclear, but buoyed by the facility support, and armed with the same can-do attitude as always, the Guild was determined to continue its mission of bringing live theatre to the community.

That spirit has always been reciprocal, adds Janet. “People really love this theater and understand the value we provide, especially since there are so few entertainment and performing arts venues on Atlanta’s south side.”

IMPACTING THE COMMUNITY WITH THE ARTS

As theaters and other businesses began to reopen in 2021, Janet and other STG leaders were especially keen to create The Southside Associates, a program envisioned to teach area youth about the theater world, showing them the path (via hands-on experience) to becoming an actor, writer, stagehand, sound engineer, costume designer, or even a director someday.

For the STG board and leaders, it was important to shine a spotlight on this impactful programming to open theater’s magical curtains to local youth who otherwise might have

been unaware of this rich form of storytelling. In addition, it provides a way to broaden the theater's audience, Janet explains.

"I want our theater to reflect our community," Reed says about intentionally diversifying and nurturing interest in theatre through this program. "We always need new ideas and new blood." All spots in the first class were filled almost instantly, planting seeds for the program to be a strong part of STG's programming in the years ahead.

MORE FACILITY NEEDS

Meanwhile, the aging facility had more plot twists – the HVAC system was now on its last legs. "Some of our air conditioning units were from 1973!" Janet exclaims with a laugh.

Faced with another big-ticket obstacle, she leveraged the successful relationship with the FTI, applying in 2022 for an FTI Preservation Grant. Along with the need to keep the space cooled or warmed properly, the pandemic had created an imperative for facility owners to ensure well-circulated, properly filtered air as well.

The FTI approved the Preservation Grant for \$19,300. More funds were needed for the HVAC upgrades, so FTI Director Leigh Burns suggested Reed also apply for a \$25,000 grant from Southface, a nonprofit promoting sustainable facilities. Specifically, the grant came from Southface's GoodUse program, which helps nonprofits reduce utility costs and reinvest those savings into their programs. With much of the grant content already in hand from her FTI grant, the process was easy. Southface approved it, even adding \$5,000 to the award based on the size of STG's facility.

"Like the FTI, Southface was so kind and helpful," Reed says. "They gave us much more than funds – they sent an engineer out to evaluate our facility, who did a complete assessment. Bryant Hains [Southface Technical Principal] has been amazing to work with. His team gave us a roadmap for other work we will need to do."

With two grants in hand, Reed was able to raise more funds from local community donors to round out the project's budget, and the HVAC project was completed in 2022.

Clearly, the endorsement of two major Atlanta institutions meant a lot – not just tactically in terms of equipment, technology and expertise, but also by validating the theatre’s intrinsic value to other partners and creating a new sense of momentum. Janet is more succinct: “They saved this theatre!”

STRIKING A BALANCE

For non-profits, striking a balance between facility needs and mission goals can be a challenge. The Southside Theatre Guild, Reed points out, is fortunate to have secured a permanent facility early in its history, after starting out in various borrowed spaces. The building, adjacent to downtown Fairburn, had formerly housed a skating rink and then a movie theatre, and was gifted to the organization by a very generous donor, James Clifton, in 1980.

As a non-profit – and metro Atlanta’s oldest continually running all-volunteer community theater – finding the funds to maintain that special gift can be a tall order. Against that backdrop, the passion and commitment of volunteers like Janet and the entire STG leadership team shine like beacons. Pairing that with support from the Fox Theatre Institute, Southface, and many local donors and volunteers, the stage is set for the curtain to continue rising at this beloved community theater for years to come.

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